

SPORT AND RESILIENCE ([Odile Jacob publications](#))

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Emotional health and sport: a virtuous circle

Chapter by Mark Milton

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INTRODUCTION

Both sport and the world of psychology have evolved considerably in recent decades, particularly since the dawn of the 21st century. The aim of this chapter is to introduce you to the convergence that is taking place between these two worlds and the impact of this evolution on the development of sport and human beings.

EMOTIONAL HEALTH

What is emotional health? We all know what physical health and mental health mean. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make contribution to his or her community."³

The concept of emotional health, on the other hand, has emerged much more recently, building on the democratization of psychology that began in the late 20th century. Emotional health has thus moved out of the exclusive domain of medicine to become part of society in general and, little by little, everyone's business. Its definition varies according to culture and sensibilities, and will certainly evolve over time.

Emotional health can be understood as a state of emotional well-being, which encompasses a growing awareness, through our life experiences, of the impact of our emotions on other aspects of our health, including physical, mental, and spiritual (meaning of life). Emotional health involves our ability to accept our emotions. It can be understood as a space that allows us to become aware of the quality of our state of mind, our thoughts, our presence, and above all, their impact on our lives, our relationships, and our environment. This awareness leads us to the concept of interpersonal skills, which can be defined as the ability to align our core values with our interactions with ourselves, others, and our environment.

¹ Mark Milton and Catherine Schmider, [Football: a path to self-awareness](#), E4P Editions, 2016, 173 pages.

² Mark Milton and Catherine Schmider, [Master of Your Emotions](#), E4P Editions, 2016, 173 pages.

³ WHO, *10 facts about mental health*, 2014

The arrival of the concepts of emotional intelligence and positive psychology, together with that of resilience in the late 1990s, sparked a movement that popularized psychology, making it accessible to a wide audience. There has been a veritable explosion of publications on personal development and media coverage of the subject. At the same time, the growth and widespread use of coaching have also fueled collective awareness of the impact of emotions on people's daily lives. Human psychology has thus emerged from the realm of medicine and science.

Since then, millions of people from all walks of life and eager to contribute to the well-being of others have trained, through a multitude of different approaches, to understand and improve emotional health in a wide variety of environments, such as management, education, mediation, art, and of course sport. Coming from the world of sport, coaches can now be found in all sectors. The role of coach has become a natural part of our society, but let's not forget that less than 20 years ago, talking about listening, empathy, support, and kindness seemed very "psychological" to most of us.

We can therefore consider that the concept of emotional health arose from the emergence of a collective awareness of the impact of our emotions on our health and well-being, and from the realization that each of us gains from getting to know ourselves better and developing our interpersonal skills in order to achieve our full potential for well-being and live better together.

SPORT AND PSYCHOLOGY: A HISTORY OF TWO FIELDS THAT HAVE BEEN CONVERGING SINCE ANCIENT TIMES

The practice of sport dates back several millennia, with the first Olympic Games believed to have taken place in 776 BC. At that time, gods and symbolism played an important role in society, but also in sport. Art was also present, with poems being read to the winners during the award ceremonies. During the Roman Empire, chariot drivers and coachmen were perhaps the first sporting heroes, adored by crowds for over a millennium.

The term "psychology" dates to the 16th century and has its roots in Latin and ancient Greek, with "*psukhē*" meaning breath, spirit, or soul, and "*logia*" meaning science, study, or research. Until the 19th century, psychology was considered a branch of philosophy. Much earlier, Plato (427–348 BC) and Aristotle (384–322 BC) had already taken an interest in emotions and thought.

It should be noted that the roots of these fields were deeply embedded in the values of society at the time, linked to the gods, the soul, the spirit, and art.

For just over a century, sport and psychology have undergone major changes and become more accessible to the public. These two fields are also growing closer together, although their union was announced several centuries ago. Indeed, the Roman Empire already cited "a healthy mind in a healthy body," a quote that the renovator of the Olympic Games, Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937), transformed into "an ardent spirit in a muscular body."

A NEW SCIENCE AND NEW OLYMPIC GAMES

These two fields have evolved considerably since the end of the 19th century. Psychology has become a recognized science, a discipline at the crossroads of neurology and psychiatry, while sport has been marked by the reform of the Olympic Games and the creation of the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

In 1894, the reform of the Olympic Games enabled sport to develop and convey strong human values based on friendship and respect. In creating the IOC, Pierre de Coubertin's ambition was to make sport a model of peace and harmony, protecting a set of values that go beyond the competition arena. A historian and educator, he placed education at the heart of his thinking and, as we will see later, the opportunities that are opening today are fueling his ambition. That said, some have sometimes used the universal popularity of the Olympic Games for political ends, notably Adolf Hitler, who in 1936 turned them into a tool for Nazi propaganda. Sport thus became a powerful vehicle for communication.

HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

After World War II, in the mid 20th century, psychology entered a new era with the arrival of humanistic psychology and its new perspectives on human relations. This was based on a positive view of human beings, endowed with an innate capacity for self-actualization, self-knowledge, and the ability to mobilize their growth forces and natural positive tendencies to develop their potential.

Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) was one of the leading figures in the field of self-development. He created the theory of motivation and needs, represented by the pyramid of needs, known as Maslow's pyramid (1943). He started from the principle that the more our basic human needs are satisfied, such as food, shelter, and safety, the more we move towards other needs, such as emotional needs, belonging, and esteem, until we reach the top of the pyramid, which is described as self-actualization, or the meaning we give to our lives. Regardless of the hierarchy of needs, the relevance of Maslow's pyramid is certainly due to the recognition of the concept of universal human needs. This awareness that all human beings share common needs is the foundation that allows us to restore connections and peace during disagreements or conflicts. The important work of Marshall Rosenberg (1934–2015), a student of Carl Rogers and creator of Nonviolent Communication, which has spread throughout the world, bears witness to this.

Carl Rogers (1902–1987) was also an important figure in this new era. He created the Person-Centered Approach, which was initially based on the principle of non-directiveness. In the therapeutic world, he emphasized the quality of the relationship between caregiver and patient, with a focus on the values of empathic listening, authenticity, and non-judgment. Beyond the therapeutic world, these fundamental values and attitudes have influenced helping relationships and human support in general, including coaching.

Many approaches inspired by this humanistic psychology movement developed from the 1950s to the present day under the term "personal development," such as Transactional Analysis, Gestalt therapy, NLP, art therapy, sophrology, and many others. In addition, in recent years, the ancient practices of meditation and Yoga have become widely available to the public, contributing to the spread of mindfulness.

⁴ Abraham Maslow and Agnès Prigent, *Self-Actualization: From Motivation to Fulfilment*, Eyrolles, 1964, 207 pages

⁵ Marshall Rosenberg, *Words Are Windows (or They Are Walls)*, La Découverte, 2004, 264 pages

⁶ Carl Rogers, *Le développement de la personne* (The Development of the Person), Interedition, 2005, 274 pages

Thus, according to the French magazine *Sciences Humaines*, "Personal development techniques aim at self-transformation: either to get rid of certain pathological aspects (phobia, anxiety, depression, shyness) or to improve performance (better communication, time management, assertiveness)." ⁷

SPORT AND WELL-BEING

In the 1970s, sport became a means of promoting and preventing physical health, particularly with the arrival of new activities such as jogging, aerobics, and fitness. A new culture was born, one of well-being, taking care of one's body, and understanding one's body and its needs. Playing sports to develop and maintain physical health even became a medical recommendation and a healthy lifestyle choice. For many, it became a social lifestyle. The fact that this did not exist less than 40 years ago shows how capable human beings are of change and allows us to imagine what we can create when we set our intentions on serving life and well-being. The same evolution is happening today with the democratization of psychology and the development of self-awareness from childhood.

FROM PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT TO SELF-AWARENESS

At the end of the 1990s, a silent revolution began with the democratization of psychology. Among many events, we can mention the arrival of emotional intelligence with Daniel Goleman's book ⁸, Martin Seligman's positive psychology ⁹, and mindfulness, notably Jon Kabat-Zinn ¹⁰ and Thich Nhat Hanh. The concept of resilience, introduced in French-speaking countries by Boris Cyrulnik, brought a new perspective on the human ability to bounce back from difficult or even traumatic experiences. All these events contributed to the popularization of psychology; words such as resilience, empathy, listening, social skills, support, and kindness took on new meaning in today's society.

The millions of books sold each year on personal development and its evolution in the business world and the workplace in general have transformed human relationships. In many countries, the concept of social skills, also known as soft skills, has not only become a common term for managers, but is also part of the assessment of professional skills. In less than 20 years, the concept of coaching, which originated in the world of sports, has been introduced into virtually every field and around the world.

At the same time, since the early 21st century, numerous school projects around the world have been encouraging children to develop their emotional and interpersonal skills. These have spread throughout the English-speaking world under the name *Social and Emotional*

⁷ "Learning to Live: From Ancient Philosophies to Personal Development," *Les Grands dossiers des Sciences Humaines*, No. 23, June-July-August 2011, No. 23

⁸ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, J'ai lu, 1997,

⁹ Martin Seligman, *The Happiness Project: A Practical Guide to Finding Happiness*, InterEditions, 2011

¹⁰ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Au coeur de la tourmente, la pleine conscience (Mindfulness: A Revolution in Health Care)*, J'ai lu, 2012

Learning (SEL). Children learn to identify and name their emotions and listen to those of others. They thus develop listening skills and learn to manage their frustrations and the conflicts they will inevitably encounter. With the advent of mindfulness-based approaches, they also learn to identify and cultivate their inner calm, enabling them to live more peacefully with themselves and in harmony with others. This ability to tame their inner selves, to know themselves better and to relate to others offers a glimpse of the education of tomorrow.

Children who develop these values and skills through sports or at school simply talk about learning about themselves, not personal development. The evolution of this educational trend is certainly leading to a new era and a form of transition, where we are moving from personal development to self-knowledge. It should be noted that the origin of personal development lies in healing, while self-awareness has its roots in prevention, in anticipation of the inevitable challenges that await us all. The difference between these initial intentions, from healing to prevention, will lead to new horizons of hope for future generations.

As social and emotional skills learning spreads among young people, from school desks to big screens, with films such as Walt Disney and Pixar's *Inside Out*, this new educational dimension is now at the doorstep of sport. The relational dimension that is central to coaching outside the world of sport, which has spread throughout the world, is now being invited to become part of sport.

SPORT AND SELF-AWARENESS TODAY

In 2016, the Belgian, French, and Swiss national football federations made self-awareness one of their educational objectives. The national technical departments chose to integrate self-awareness as a skill to be developed for the football of tomorrow. This integration will take place at the level of national coaches in France and at the level of grassroots football coach training in Belgium and Switzerland.

Among the educational objectives, working on awareness of behavior and attitude is central. The three federations are distributing the joint publication *Football, a path to self-awareness*¹¹ to the coaches concerned. Whether the focus is on well-being or performance, the aim is to make this new skill accessible and attractive to as many people as possible, from young people to adults who may never have experienced personal development work before.

In 2007, UEFA invited the Swiss foundation "Education 4 Peace," which initiated and published this book, to create a project aimed at reducing violence in football and society. This project was named "Master of your Emotions," with the intention of making this skill attractive to young people. It is proposed that attitude be introduced as the 5th skill, after physical, technical, tactical, and mental skills.

The three basic skills—physical, technical, and tactical—have been developed in a highly specialized manner in recent years. Thanks to the evolution of teaching approaches and tools, the knowledge and the transfer of these basic skills to athletes have reached a point where the margin for improvement is becoming slim.

¹¹Mark Milton and Catherine Schmider, *Football: A Pathway to Self-Awareness*, E4P Editions, 2016, 173 pages.

On a physical level, stories of doping testify to the natural limits of human beings. The fourth skill, mental skill, developed in elite sports with the arrival of mental coaches in the 1980s, focuses primarily on concentration, endurance, and knowledge of one's own physical limits to improve individual performance. The 5th skill, attitude, involves interpersonal and emotional skills, awareness, and the development of the quality of our relationships with ourselves, others, and our environment.

Although the project was initially focused on grassroots soccer with a social purpose, particularly to promote respect and fair play, the experience gained from this new skill, delivered through a range of support and training programs, has spread to professional soccer. This new educational approach has proven to be a shared need among many. Numerous testimonials from players and coaches have revealed that learning to remain in control in highly emotional situations improves performance.

A keyway to encourage young and old alike to take an interest in self-awareness is to share testimonials from top athletes about their experiences. Those who have behaved in a way they regret, who are able to question themselves and share what they have learned from the experience, are the new heroes. Among the most memorable testimonials is that of Zinédine Zidane:

"When I started out, I was very afraid. It was by daring to face my fears that I got to know myself, developed my self-confidence, and became aware of my potential. My parents' support was essential. They always supported me without demanding that I be the best. I was able to develop with confidence, without pressure. Today, as a coach, my goal is to get my players in the best physical condition, of course, but also emotionally. My experience leads me to encourage communication with and between players, to help them get to know themselves better and express how they feel. I am convinced that self-awareness has an impact on performance and will contribute to the beauty of tomorrow's soccer."

More athletes and major clubs are using approaches such as meditation and yoga in their training. Self-awareness enables the link between performance and emotional health, and sport is a vast and important arena for this development.

The history and origins of sport, namely values, entertainment, health, and well-being, offer the advantage of a predisposed environment for training. However, it is essential that the culture of sport transforms and abandons the paradigm of "winning at all costs." This is true both on the field and in the world of sports governance led by leaders.

At the dawn of the 21st century, a virtuous circle is in place. While self-knowledge contributes to the evolution of sport, sport enables human beings to develop awareness of their behavior, learn about themselves, and improve not only their physical health but also their emotional well-being.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

"Sport has the power to change the world because it has the power to inspire people. Around us, there are few actions capable of uniting people. Sport speaks to young people in a language they understand. It brings hope where there was once despair. It is stronger than politics and governments in breaking down racial barriers, overcoming discrimination and prejudice." Nelson Mandela

Recognizing these profound changes that have taken place in such a short time gives us a glimpse of the potential for change in the future if we focus our priorities on values that serve humanity and life. A collective consciousness is awakening, and thanks to a critical mass (when a certain percentage of the population shares the same values) a shift seems possible today despite the human suffering that exists. The younger generations carry this hope, with many young people today living by values other than those that emerged after the Second World War, such as materialism and the importance of social status. Learning to respect oneself while respecting others, caring for the environment, cultivating gratitude, and learning to know oneself to discern between personal and collective interests are the intentions and values expressed by more young people who want to create a world where life is good.

Realizing that this evolution has taken place in less than 20 years and listening to people's thirst for greater equity, peace, and respect in their relationships and environment gives us hope for the future. Sport as a training ground for self-knowledge is an opportunity that all sports federations, associations, and clubs are invited to seize.

CONCLUSION

Our ability to cope with adversity in life determines our future. Sport offers the unique opportunity to develop our experience in dealing with opponents and to become more aware and responsible for our behavior. Everyone's life is made up of adversity, from minor annoyances to major conflicts, from losing a job to losing a loved one. Our ability to face adversity in all its forms, to accept it, manage it, and overcome it, shapes our next steps. Sport provides an experimental ground where we can learn about ourselves, exercise and develop our resilience.

This opportunity offered by sport is perhaps our greatest chance to live less suffering and more peace, both individually and collectively.

Translated from the original French by the author